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ABSTRACT

A primary internal concern of an intimate relationship is that each partner communicates with the other. A breakdown of communication may occur when an occurrence construed as minor or negligible by one partner precipitates a major explosion of anger, rage, and hurt by the other. Both partners may be at fault for allowing a disagreement to reach such a point. In a study on anger, 63 participants furnished two autobiographical accounts, one from the perpetrator's perspective and one from that of the victim. Accumulated grievances were found most often in accounts taken from the perspective of the victim. However, by not showing anger when the perpetrators' objectionable behavior first began to appear, the victims indirectly acknowledged the behavior and allowed it to continue. Perpetrators viewed victims' outbursts as inappropriate responses to single incidents. Communication between partners (often studied in interpersonal courses) is of the utmost importance if a relationship is to continue and thrive. Lines of communication must remain open and clear. One cause of such conflicts is the differing time perspectives of victim and perpetrator. What the victim sees as a response to a history of grievances, the perpetrator views as a sudden, surprising eruption with no provocation. (SG)

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Personal Accounts and Autobiographical Memories

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The success of an intimate relationship depends on many factors; some external to the relationship and some from within. A primary internal concern when initiating or maintaining a relationship is that each partner is communicating with the other. In order for things to run smoothly, both partners need to be aware of the ongoing dynamics of the relationship and to express their thoughts and feelings regarding each other.

When a breakdown in communication occurs, feelings may become hurt and egos bruised as a result of a lack of awareness and expression. Oftentimes, an instance or occurrence that might be construed as minor or negligible by one partner will precipitate a major explosion of anger, rage and hurt by the other. Initially, it would appear that the angry partner, the partner that was hurt or injured by the other's actions, is over-reacting. It would appear that the "victim" is making a mountain out of a molehill. From the perspective of the perpetrator, or the instigator of the incident, this would be accurate; after all, this particular event (or similar events) has happened before and the other partner never became angry over

it. The perpetrator might well wonder why this time was different, why get angry now?

In our research on anger, using the method of autobiographical accounts, this question was generated. To answer the perpetrators question, it was necessary to look at the differing perspectives that separate the perpetrator from the victim. To illustrate, suppose that a couple, newlyweds, begin their life together by agreeing to share all of the household chores. For a period of time, this arrangement works out very well. Suppose further, that one day the wife is not feeling well and the husband gallantly offers to take over for the evening. Upon discovering how easily it was to avoid her daily chores, the wife occasionally, then frequently begs off from her work. After all, he never became angry and he was always cheerful about taking over. What the wife doesn't know, is that he is becoming angry over her lack of responsibility, although he tries not to show it. He doesn't want to make an issue out of washing a few dished or taking out the garbage; the relationship is solid, but new, and he doesn't want to upset the balance that they share. Finally, one particular day arrives that the husband is tired and has brought home work to try to get ahead on

major project. When his wife gets up and leaves the table to read, he explodes in anger, accusing her of insensitivity and of taking advantage of him. It would seem that he is reactive violently to that one, small incident while actually he is reacting to an accumulation of grievances. These grievance have been adding up over time, but he has not been acknowledging them to his wife, the perpetrator in this scenario. She views his anger as inappropriate, because this has been a standard pattern as far as she is concerned.

Both partners are at fault here; the wife for ignoring the original agreement and the husband for allowing his angry feelings to accumulate and grow without communicating them to his wife. The perception of the perpetrator (the wife) was that she was acting in a manner that was acceptable; her behavior was not deserving of the outburst that she received. The perception of the victim (the husband) resembled that of the silent martyr, to keep quiet about the goings on in order to maintain the marital bliss. He may have prided himself on his self-control for not bringing such a small grievance to the forefront. Even so, the victim did not communicate his anger to the perpetrator in a manner that would allow for resolving the

conflict. Instead, it was allowed to accumulate until the final, inevitable blow-up occurred.

The previous example is similar in concept to many of the accounts that we have reviewed and analyzed, in that each partner's perception of the situation was different. In my research with Dr. Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University, we analyzed autobiographical accounts from 63 participants. Each participant furnished two accounts, one from the perpetrator perspective and one from that of the victim. The accounts were analyzed through the use of content coding, for the presence or absence of certain key features. Some of these features included relationship damage, long term past or history of the incident, and justification of victim anger, among other elements. These codings were then compared, using the chi-square method of analysis.

Through analysis of the autobiographical accounts, we found that accumulated grievances were most often found in accounts taken from the perspective of the victim. The victims often reported controlling or containing their angry feelings, likening the process to the positive process of self-control. By maintaining the status quo, the victims seemed to feel

that they were maintaining the balance of the relationship. When the victims did express their anger, it was perceived as an uncalled for outburst by the perpetrators. The perpetrators could not understand why the victims reacted as they did. By not showing anger in response to the actions of the perpetrators, the victims indirectly acknowledged the behavior and allowed it to continue. The perpetrators, unaware of the repeated grievances, continued to act accordingly and were surprised at the reactions they received as a result. To the perpetrators, the victims' angry outbursts are in response to one incident and are judged as inappropriate. In addition, the perpetrators could very well feel persecuted as a result of one insignificant act that never caused a problem in the past.

The implication of this finding for close relationships is fairly straightforward: communication between partners within a relationship is of the utmost importance if the relationship is to continue and to thrive. The lines must remain open and clear; communicating with each other should not be threatening to one or the other, otherwise a situation similar to the one previously mentioned could occur.

The findings that are briefly mentioned here suggest one cause of conflict within relationships that relates to a different time perspective of the partners regarding certain incidents or events. One participant, the victim, tends to view the incident from within a broad and long term framework. The grievance in question actually stems from a long history of grievances from the victim's perspective. The angry feelings are building and compounding, until that final blow-up occurs. The victim holds in these feelings as long as possible before erupting. Please note that I am not advocating a "hydraulic" theory of emotion in this essay; the description of anger as compounding, accumulating or building over time is merely an illustration of the intensity of feeling as a result of accumulating grievances!

From the perpetrator's perspective, there is no connection between past incidents or events and the incident that is happening right now. The perpetrator is blissfully unaware of the impending "eruption" from the victim and is genuinely surprised when it occurs. It appears to come from out of the blue, with no provocation. In essence, the time frame within which the conflict is viewed is the key.

For further information, please refer to the following:

Baumeister, R.F., Stillwell, A. and Wotman, S.R. (1990). Victim and perpetrator accounts of interpersonal conflict: Autobiographical narratives about anger. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59. 994-1005.

Baumeister, R.F. and Stillwell, A. (in press- 1991). Autobiographical accounts, situational roles and motivated biases: When stories don't match up. In J. Harvey, T. Orbuch and A. Weber (Eds.), Accounts, attributions and intimate relationships. New York: Springer-Verlag.